Russia at Play:
The Social Role of Commercial Culture in Post-Soviet Russia

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Project Information:

Contractor: University of Hawaii
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Council Contract Number: 813-09g
Date: November 9, 1998

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* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author(s).
From Soviet to Post-Soviet

When Mikhail Gorbachev initiated his program of glasnost in the mid-1980s, Western observers applauded the increased tolerance for intellectual expression. Famed dissident Andrei Sakharov was released from his internal exile to Gorkii (now, Nizhni Novgorod). Georgian director Tenghiz Abuladze’s film on the purges in his region, “Repentance,” was taken off the shelf and played to packed movie houses around the country. The rehabilitation of poet Nikolai Gumilev, who had died fighting against the Bolshevik Revolution, signaled the changed status former intellectuals non gratis. Within a few years, even Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s Nobel Prize-winning exposes of the Stalinist concentration camps would be sold openly in paperback.

The West celebrated glasnost with those Soviet citizens with whom it had long enjoyed common political cause, the intelligentsia, or intellectual elite who have traditionally-- dating essentially from the reign of Catherine the Great in the second half of the eighteenth century--served as the semi-official opposition to the succession of non-democratic regimes. President Jimmy Carter, for example, called Sakharov before he did Communist Party boss Leonid Brezhnev. What Westerners did not pay serious attention to, though, in the later headiness of the glasnost era and the euphoria of August, 1991, when the system crashed with the finality of Humpty Dumpty, was that popular culture in general enjoyed an unprecedented topical openness.

An article in Leningradskaja pravda (The Leningrad Truth) just weeks before the attempted coup reported an alarming rate of persons claiming to have had contact with UFOs. Psychiatrists recognized in this phenomenon the growing fears of being engulfed in political chaos, but it was also reflective of the popular taste for fantastika, or science fiction. Moreover, it crudely anticipated the terrific popularity of the American television show “The X-Files,” the success of which has often been attributed to the psychological need for a new enemy when the Cold War ended. Russians were developing significantly different fears: the notion that they should worry about war with the United States had disappeared from the list of major anxieties by 1994.

Western academics have neglected Soviet, and subsequently Russian, popular culture at their own peril. With the exception of Richard Stites’s introductory textbook, Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900 (Cambridge University Press, 1992), studies of Russian/Soviet culture have privileged that produced by the intelligentsia for political as well as aesthetic reasons. Because in the Soviet era anything produced for mass consumption had first been vetted by the state censorship, it was dismissed as a false reflection of popular tastes.

Even were that the case, the situation no longer holds true in the postsoviet era. The movies,
books. and television shows that attract the widest audiences today can offer many more valuable insights than those offered by the now disenfranchised intelligentsia. Television ratings, for example, sank Solzhenitsyn's brief career as a Moscow talk show host. The same intellectuals who had sought western contacts when they met roadblocks along their own intellectual avenues now chafed at another aspect of western politics: freedom of cultural choice. In the words of intelligent Yogi Berra, "It was deja vu all over again."

The Politics of Russian Culture in the Historical Perspective

The intelligentsia has long enjoyed special entitlement in Russian culture because of the extent to which the latter has been politicized historically. They considered themselves a social estate, consolidating as a bloc rather than as a class representing an economic grouping. Coalescing around values, they could be recognized by their attitudes and behavior. The autocracy's most vociferous as well as its most articulate opposition, the intelligentsia used culture to build the foundation of civil society. Denied political institutions, they used the arts and literature to set the terms of critique and debate about politics and society. Conferring upon Russia's culture a transcendental truth that validated their own position in society, they invested it with so many of their ideals that culture carried a more overt political force in the Russian than in the Western context.

Denying self-interest and operating outside the government, the intelligentsia established a hegemonic authority over Russian culture because they could legitimately claim to speak on behalf of the interests of a variety of groups, especially those who lacked the requisite skills to articulate their aspirations for themselves. As poet-intelligent Osip Mandelshtam, himself of victim of Stalin's purges in the second war between the government and the intelligentsia, observed, "The battle between the writers and the regime was explicitly understood, on both sides, as a battle for custody of the future of their country." Symptomatically, like other successful political parties, the Russian intelligentsia's protestations of selflessness masked a political agenda that located them in the center of power, where they reaped significant benefits from their moral and intellectual prestige. They set and then defended the borders of the notion that Russia's culture played a unique and pivotal role in its history. By offering a morally satisfying ideology, articulated in terms of guilt and redemption already familiar through Orthodox Christianity, the intelligentsia could appeal to ordinary Russians.

This philosophy offered something to all social and political clusters. As Pierre Bourdieu has
argued, those who control the investments in cultural capital, which includes physical as well as intellectual access to it, exercise powerful political mechanisms because of their capacity to determine the tastes that authenticate a system of values. Ironically, as culture itself became increasingly susceptible to commodification, whether in the form of a book or a theater ticket, it was the intelligentsia who fetishized it, investing it with all the value of Russia’s history, past and future.

When cultural studies began to examine power relationships between groups, it offered an explanation for the leverage that the intelligentsia employed by arguing that the dominant group exercises its influence over the subordinate groups through its ability “to exert the power to frame alternatives and contain opportunities, to win and shape consent, so that the granting of legitimacy to the dominant classes appears not only ‘spontaneous’ but natural and normal.” The intelligentsia accrued power not only through “the specific content of ideas,” but also by establishing “limits within which ideas and conflicts move and (could be) resolved.” Such was the power of this group’s influence that all of Russia’s various social groups accepted as “normal” the intelligentsia’s authority in civic and cultural discourse.

The closest the intelligentsia came to establishing an institutional basis was through the so-called “thick” journals they edited, compendia of essays and especially literary reviews. Thus did they set up the sort of informal networks that Michel Foucault termed “regimes of truth,” and Arturo Escobar “regimes of representation,” that is, powerful but supra-institutional dominions over public culture. The cultural debates argued in the pages of these journals provided a frame of political reference as well as stocks of common symbols in which even nonreaders found themselves enmeshed for generations. To give one example, the notion that art and literature must rise above class or estate interests and serve a political function came to be accepted as truth, not the self-interest of the group that propagated it.

The intelligentsia’s position would prove to be intensely ideological in practice, yet it had become accepted as a component of Russia’s natural historical development rather than an issue open to debate. At the turn of the twentieth century, when some frustrated Russian intellectuals challenged the notion that culture must be politicized in order to realize a particular social vision, the debate could not work its way out of the cultural frame that set the terms, a frame that had become repressive with age.

This lack of an institutional basis from which the intelligentsia could legislate their ideas into practice was really as much a luxury as a liability, despite how it appeared to them at the time. Freed from responsibility before voters, they could indulge in ideals and avoid the messiness of compromise. To be sure, they paid the high, sometimes exorbitant, price of exile and death for their position. But the stakes, as Mandelshtam observed, were sufficiently high to warrant their costs.

Russian society, though, was never as static as the facades of autocracy and communism would
suppose. The Great Reforms launched in the 1860s, followed by rapid industrialization in the 1890s, changed both the social contours of society and its political expectations. The future of the empire depended upon the ability of its leaders to create a vision of shared destiny, to integrate a population increasingly divided by race, religion, and economic status into a unified whole.\textsuperscript{13}

The liberalism of the West, with its emphasis on individualism, offered easily as many challenges as it did enticements. Not only would equality of opportunity be impossible to achieve quickly, there was no consensus that a pluralism which accepted differences was a desirable goal. The question of individual rights became inextricably entwined with the \textit{intelligentsia}'s transcendent concept of the populace as an undifferentiated whole, an exploited group incapable of recognizing its best self-interest. This ideologized image could not hold up well under objective scrutiny once other changes, such as those in the economy, began to effect social relations, and formerly abstract notions of rights began to require practical applications.

When commercial culture began to develop in the second half of the nineteenth century, its purveyors found themselves caught between the state's Scylla of conservative censorship and the \textit{intelligentsia}'s Charybdis of moral certitude with little room for negotiation. One of the lasting effects of the \textit{intelligentsia}'s moral authority is the suspicion of personal wealth, a potential cultural brake to capitalism.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Cultural Studies and Russian/Soviet/Russian History}

However imposing, the \textit{intelligentsia}'s control was nevertheless elusive, a process rather than an absolute condition. One of the fundamental flaws in the study of Russian history is the reluctance to break away from the \textit{intelligentsia} in any era in order to examine the cultural alternatives that began to blossom with the expanding economy in the late nineteenth century. Jeffrey Brooks's seminal study of mass literature, \textit{When Russia Learned to Read} (Princeton, 1985), was quickly successful but slow to actually change the historiography through the force of the implications of his research. Brooks found in the literature that the lower classes produced and consumed for themselves many of the cultural values associated with capitalism, especially that of rewards based on individual effort. The key was to examine the lowbrow rather than the highbrow.

Historians have been aided in the past decade by the analytical inroads made by the multidisciplinary approach that falls under the rubric "cultural studies." Stuart Hall, a pioneer in this
development, succinctly characterized the project as an "attempt to address the manifest break-up of traditional culture, especially traditional class cultures. (and) it set about registering the impact of the new forms of affluence and consumer society on the very hierarchical and pyramidal" social structures.\textsuperscript{15}

As cultural studies has ably demonstrated, subjugated social groups have always contested control, even within the restrictive frame of cultural and political reference established by the dominant group, which in the case of both prerevolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union would mean the intelligentsia. In her revisionist work on modernity, Rita Felski pointed out that cultural studies has "irreversibly problematized the opposition between a 'high' literature assumed to be inherently ambiguous and self-critical and a mass culture equated with the reproduction of a monolithic ideological standpoint."\textsuperscript{16}

Hall has emphasized the multiplicity of possible interpretations of any given text, arguing that "the political valence of popular culture inheres not in its texts, but rather in the negotiation between socially positioned viewers and the codes that structure texts." In other words, the audience, like the text, has a changeable context. To continue his point that "popular texts lack any intrinsic ideological closure"\textsuperscript{17} is to take some of the power away from the intelligentsia.

Approaching from another theoretical direction, Arturo Escobar critiqued the modernization theory that long connected Russia's economic evolution to that of other "emerging" societies. Escobar voiced modest hope in the capacity for cultural studies to critique effectively the totalizing theories that have preceded it -- an exercise which would include the role of the intelligentsia in Russian historiography -- because cultural studies respects the power of cultural difference.\textsuperscript{18}

Borrowing from techniques and paradigms developed by cultural studies, this essay looks at contemporary mass-oriented commercial culture in order to ascertain how ordinary Russians have understood and adapted to the massive changes that their society has undergone since the exhilarating first days of glasnost' and perestroika. Based in part on interviews with approximately 100 youths approximately twenty years old, of different social, geographical, and educational backgrounds, this study surveys popular commercial culture both to acquaint the reader with the latest trends and to offer explanations of their larger influence in contemporary society.\textsuperscript{19} As western governments continue the financial transfusions perceived necessary to keep the so-called "reformers," or politicians who advocate an economy based on private initiative rather than state controls, in power, it becomes increasingly crucial that a means be found of assessing the mood of the people upon whom the ultimate success of reform depends.

\textbf{Freedom of the Press but No Press Freedom}
Thomas Jefferson's observation that "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a
government without newspapers or newspapers without a government. I should not hesitate for a moment
to prefer the latter" has long imparted a quality of public spiritedness to the American press that has belied
the reality that news media are in fact commercial operations, serving stockholders as well as readers.20
That Alexis de Tocqueville considered that "in the United States . . . the power of the press is second only
to that of the people" further reminded of the potential power of mass communications, generating an
image of American media that the Russian intelligentsia, bereft of constitutional safeguards protecting
freedom of speech, could only envy.21

With the Communist Party and the Soviet state in charge of Pravda (The Truth) and Izvestia (The
News) respectively, news media served an overtly political agenda that gave readers insights into political
debates on high but that denied a voice to a genuinely public opinion. The official censorship has
disappeared in the postcommunist era, but euphoria over freedom of expression has given way to a
frustration with a reality that Jefferson overlooked, but savvy publishers from William Randolph Hearst to
Ted Turner have taken quick advantage of: mass media are big business, with profits measured potentially
on a political as well as a financial balance sheet.

It should come as no surprise to Westerners that Russian business tycoons moved quickly into
media publishing and broadcasting. The so-called "oligarchs" who control approximately half of the
Russian economy also have their hands in the media: they include Most-Group's Vladimir Gusinskii, who
controls NTV and the news magazine Itogi (Conclusions); Menatep-Rosprom group's Mikhail
Khodorkovskii and Oneximbank-Interros group's Vladimir Potanin, who wield their influence through
journals more than television; and the supreme mogul Boris Berezovskii, who has parlayed a 10 percent
interest in ORT, Channel 1 and the Most Popular T.V. station, in addition to newspapers Nezavisimaia
Gazeta (The Independent Newspaper) and Noviie Izvestia (The New News), into a position of remarkable
political power.22

Berezovskii, who poured badly needed capital into Yeltsin's presidential campaign in 1996, was
rewarded with the position of deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council. Although Yeltsin was
successfully pressured to drop his controversial appointee, Berezovskii has remained close to the
president's highly influential daughter, Tatiana Dyachenko, and has most recently been named Executive
Secretary for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the confederation of many of the former
republics that constituted the USSR.

From this position, Berezovskii has the potential to affect lucrative trade agreements. He gave an
effective display of strength when his media supported former general Alexander Lebedev, one of
Yeltsin's nemeses. In an election in April for the governorship of mineral-rich Krasnoiarsk. Yeltsin's response to the threat of an independent press that does not support his policies has been to propose the creation of a production/technical media holding company by the end of 1998.

Many of Yeltsin's political dilemmas are, of course, unprecedented in Russia, and the notion that commerce serves public rather than private interests is traditionally anathema because of the intelligentsia's historical hegemonic influence. Because the media moguls understandably support reforms that advance their own best capitalist economic interests, doubts arise concerning the extent to which the publishers' interests reflect those of their readers, who seek information but cannot always find alternative sources. These doubts, however, beset the commercial presses of every country, and are addressed in large part through competition, although the amount of capital required to launch a medium of mass communications limits that particular option. The point is that analysts must devise new categories for studying the Russian media, and strategies that have seemed simplistic in other areas are now becoming more complex.

A significant amount about attitudes can be learned from the newspapers and journals peddled for popular consumption whose editors and publishers are playing for considerably smaller stakes than Berezovskii. "Soversheno sekretno" (Top Secret), a weekly tabloid with the finesse, and the appeal, of the "National Enquirer" continues to sell to readers the all too human images of politicos and other celebrities. This Moscow-based weekly played a formative role in desacralizing the leadership, replacing the rumor mill with black-and-white photos of misdeeds and reprinted documentations of misappropriations.

A selection of glossy magazines now offer advice, especially to women, on how to improve their quotidinan existence and improve their appearance: in addition to Russian-language versions of Western standards such as Cosmopolitan, which enjoys a circulation of half a million, the Russian female can read Girl (sic), Liza (the rough equivalent of Sixteen) and Zhenskii klub (The Women's Club). Thereby, she readily can take diet tips from Oprah Winfrey and get advice on how to make oneself over and become fashionable on a limited budget.

The most noticeable surprises of the new era come in the facelifts that the old communist standbys Rabotnitsa (The Female Worker) and Krestianka (The Female Peasant) have undergone. No more plump babushkas posing with their cabbage crops, or women in overalls posing next to a drill. Svelte and eager to stay that way by following the healthy diet-and-exercise regimens that are replacing stories of record fulfillments of the Plan, the new worker and peasant eschew class identity for one based on notions of femininity. These mass-circulation journals peddle individualism as the basis of a new social identity.
Krestianka, for example, rivals Cosmo in terms of both circulation and advertising revenue.23

The Russian male is also targeted for new kinds of journals, notably with erotic magazines such as the Russian edition of Playboy and with the pornography that sells far more openly than at average American newsstands. In 1997, the publishers of Russia’s Playboy defended themselves successfully in a lawsuit brought against them for eroticizing the tsarevnas and other historical women. The suit addressed the conspicuous issue of sexism in Russia, a problem reflected more deeply in high unemployment rates for women and advertisements for female employees that openly use sexuality as a qualification for hire. Another journal launched recently though, Men’s Health, hopes to help its readers to stop the slide in the lifespan of the average Russian male, whose high-fat diet, and drinking and smoking habits are taking their toll on the population in alarming proportions.

The colorful news kiosks mirror the attitudes of a Russia better able to express changing attitudes about identity, better able to construct a new sense of self in the changing times. Such horrific headlines as “I Wash Myself in Blood.” announcing the psychology of a sociopathic killer, not only stimulate the senses, but testify to the decades of ignorance about crime under a regime that lost face before its never-that-gullible population every time it swore that violent crime did not exist. If the Russian press is not “free” as the intelligentsia used the word, it has nonetheless opened a sphere to the public in which a variety of opinions interact, even when those opinions blame the evanescent Jew for all current social ills. No value judgements need even be levied; Russians now satisfy their multifarious interests, making plain the diversity that always lay beneath the illusory conformity.

“The Rich also Cry”: the New Television Audience

One of the first major cultural indicators of change after the attempted coup in 1991 began a short while later, when Russian television began running a five-year-old Mexican soap opera, “The Rich Also Cry.” The wild popularity of this show was interpreted by the elite as a sad indication of the cultural immaturity of the masses. Western observers largely ignored it, limiting discussion of it to passing commentary rather than serious analysis. To some it was simply a fad for Western products long denied them, a welcome respite from the monotony of television programming committed to rerunning movies about World War II and productions of “Swan Lake.”24

It took a force much stronger than a simpleminded westernization, though, to account for the national addiction to “The Rich Also Cry.” Russia’s first elected president Boris Eltsin not only met officially with other world leaders, but also with actress Veronica Castro, who starred in the teleserial as
Marianna, "the contemporary Cinderella." Here some of the innovations afforded by cultural studies can help to contextualize responses to this program. This was not the first Western soap opera made available to Russian consumers: in fact, the show "Dallas," which ruled Friday nights and epitomized the greed and materialism rampant in the 1980s (subtitled "Reagan's America") had begun playing in Russia weeks before the attempted coup, but never quite caught on. It was the distinctive melodramatic properties of the Mexican show that played directly into Russian reality.

The relationship between melodrama and political revolution dates back to the origins of the genre in France in the 1790s. In her cultural history of the French Revolution, Lynn Hunt identified certain properties associated with the new style of stage play, the melodrama, with the political context in which it took shape. The genre is identified with that social group later considered the historical victors of the revolution, the middle class, and therefore suffered the cultural opprobrium of being the product of "bourgeois" taste.

As Hunt convincingly argues, though, melodramatic action is driven forward by dynamics that characterize political revolution equally effectively. The formulas of the first melodramas played heavily upon the revolutionary psyche, using the structure of the family as a microcosm of the nation writ large. The protagonist is often an orphan, or at least somehow separated from his/her biological parents, much as the postrevolutionary populace must seek a new identity without the father-king/communist party chief as the central point of reference.

Moreover, melodrama's cardinal thematic focus looks at how a new morality evolves to ground society in an ethos during a period of radical upheaval. The norms formerly affixed to social estate fell into flux as social mobility became increasingly achievable. Hence melodrama provided its mass audience with cultural tools to help them to cope with change.

The formulaic properties to which Hunt, Peter Brooks, and others who have used melodrama as a medium of analysis emerged quite clearly in "The Rich Also Cry." The dominant love affair crosses social classes, the poor Marianna with the wealthy Louis Alberto. Their initial union produces a son, unbeknownst to the father, and the boy is taken away from Marianna at birth, raised by two women whose dramatic function seems to be to keep the boy in supposed orphan status, fatherless. Later, when Louis Alberto overcomes his social prejudice and the two marry, they adopt a daughter, thus preparing the way for the anticipated incestuous relationship. When Marianna finally tracks down her now grown son, she fears Louis Alberto's moral wrath and keeps the boy a secret until he falls in love with her adoptive daughter. A happy ending recovers both identities and moralities.

Although soap operas and other melodramatic programs remain popular, including the American
series “Santa Barbara,” which always enjoyed more of a European than native audience, none has captured the enthusiasm that set “The Rich Also Cry” apart because of the remarkable correlation of alibi and cultural circumstance.

The Russian intelligentsia grew almost nostalgic for the official programming that had made Soviet television a conduit of the classics, nearly recreating the ominous political situation that Katerina Clark described so penetratingly in Petersburg, Crucible of Revolution (Harvard, 1995). As Clark illustrated, the intelligentsia played into the hands of the state by refusing to let cultural democracy take its course in the 1920s. Facile dismissals of the programs that capture mass support, or essentializing those programs as reflective of Russia’s supposedly historical subservience to the west, obscure the cultural reality of a society in search of itself.

Television, as Ellen Mickiewicz has illustrated, dominates the Russian household almost to the extent that it does its American counterpart. The social role of television has changed, though, with the privatization of the media. No longer a government-sponsored medium for socialization according to an already scripted ideology, television plays a more complicated role as private enterprise now competes for viewers. The government still makes its position known through its own RTR (channel 2), but the competition from emerging media moguls Berezovskii and Gusinskii have made “choice” a reality in the past few years.

Russians have not yet developed dramatic programs or situation comedies of sufficient quality to maintain a national following and therefore continue to depend upon foreign imports in these categories. But they have made the game show their own. Pole chudes, which translates as “Field of Dreams,” combines aspects of “Jeopardy” and “Wheel of Fortune” but with a distinctively Russian flavor that allows the host far more conversational interaction with his audience than Americans, eager for the competition, would tolerate. Like other game shows, however, the raison d’être for “Field of Dreams” is the opportunity it offers: potential instantaneous material reward from the combination of luck and accumulated smarts. Moreover, like “Jeopardy,” it gives a cultural reference on a national scale, one built from the bottom up rather than imposed from the top down.

**Pulp Fiction**

Another cultural product long identified with the Capitalist West is also finding unique expression in Russia: crime fiction. As John Cawelti, another pioneer in the use of popular culture to explain social mores, argued, from Sherlock Holmes’s first deductions the detective has epitomized the Western resolve
for rational problem-solving. The detective also occupies a peculiar social perch on the border between law and order, good and evil, and is therefore positioned to function as a moral arbiter.

From the turn of the twentieth century Russians have enjoyed the genre, which all but disappeared in the Soviet era, forcing Russian fans to depend upon gift copies from western friends. Indeed, one of the best received gifts of glasnost was the appearance of Agatha Christie’s “Miss Marple” on Soviet television. Although Russian writers have traditionally been far more adept at penning fantastika than detective thrillers, postsoviet culture has produced a genuinely popular fictional detective from an unlikely source, a female Lt.-Colonel in the Russian domestic police at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Marina Alekseeva.

Under the pen name Aleksandra Marinina, Alekseeva has written approximately twenty novels, dominating the bestseller list in both hardback and paperback. Her primary heroine, Nastia Kamenskaia, is loosely autobiographical, a homicide cop at Moscow’s Petrovka station. The durability of Marinina’s readership derives from Alekseeva’s capacity for reconstructing contemporary reality: not all of her law-enforcement colleagues at Petrovka are as honest as she, and she has also been known to enlist the aid of those on the other side of the law, members of the mafia underworld who play an incalculable role in the current business climate.

The heroine Kamenskaia bears a stronger resemblance to the heroes and heroines of British detective novelist P. D. James, who pays closer authorial attention to the moral, as opposed to the legal, underpinnings of good and evil, than she does to Miss Marple. Thus does Alekseeva provide a useful guide to the current atmosphere of ambiguity that characterizes a society where the advantages of the capitalist system have yet to become clear to those stuck between two systems, the rejected past and the undetermined future. And in line with the new social realism, Kamenskaia does not always get her “perp.” A perpetually neat resolution could only undermine reader confidence at this point.

To the extent that pulp fiction opens an immediate window on the values of readers who come primarily from the lower classes, the cheap paperbacks that dominate the offerings at contemporary kiosks reflect fantasies of rage and romance, momentary escape into a world where the powerless find empowerment through the simplistic formulas that offer satisfaction without requiring difficult choices.

Alexander Bushkov and Viktor Dotsenko produce the Russian equivalent of the American anti-hero, the violent loner quick to assume vigilante responsibility because the system, like the proverbial fish, has become rotten at the head. Westerners might suffer the brunt of the anger directed at the corrupt capitalists against whom the heroes, often ex-military men, wage war; however, as in “Rambo,” the real enemy is the local system.
It is easy to understand the undercurrent of rage that dominates these books, consumed largely by young men with severely restricted career options. It must also be born in mind that although the settings change, the basic characters and themes have numerous equivalents in American popular culture: a check of the local movie listings will reveal a cultural tolerance for violence that is reaching an equivalent stage in Russia.

If the boys are drawn to Rambo, the girls of the same socioeconomic strata seek a sense of self in society through translations of Harlequin novels and their romantic equivalents. In her cultural-studies analysis of American women caught up in this genre, Janice Radway demonstrated how romance novels provide comfort through the distinctively anti-feminist message that "each romance is, in fact, a mythic account of how women must achieve fulfillment in patriarchal society." The cultural conservatism that marks the genre reflects the vulnerability of women in what remains a man’s world. In contemporary Russia, where unemployment among women far outpaces that of men and domestic duties remain onerous, the image a loving husband who is also a good provider offers a welcome respite.

The racist thugs who recently attacked the African-American Marine Corps sergeant would be likely candidates for Bushkov’s audience, but it would be a gross exaggeration to argue for comparable levels of racism in contemporary Russia and Nazi Germany. One fundamental problem is the same that the intelligentsia posed in the nineteenth century, namely, how to incorporate all levels of society into one coherent national whole. For them, however, culture was a tool rather than a mirror. Although the action dramas and the romance novels can be considered socially destructive on one level, in that they stimulate desire through false pretenses and therefore contribute more to contemporary problems than to their potential resolutions, to destroy the stocks would prove even more damaging because it would repeat an already failed experiment. Russians must exercise freedom of choice before they can truly appreciate it.

**Russia’s New Line Cinema**

The Soviet cinema enjoyed a world-class status, directors Sergei Eisenstein and Andrei Tarkovskii, to name only the top two of the cinematic pantheon, influenced styles on an international scale. The greats, however, were never the most popular: Soviet film audiences, for example, preferred the Hollywoodesque musicals produced by Eisenstein’s apprentice, Grigorii Aleksandrov. The international films that played in Soviet art houses would likewise satisfy avant-garde rather than popular tastes.

Postcommunist viewers, though, can purchases tickets to everything from the latest American
blockbuster to imported pornography. The influx of foreign films represents the lack of financing available to the Russian movie industry, though, more than it reflects audience preferences. The students surveyed demonstrated a familiarity with international films, especially American action films, unthinkable a decade ago when Arnold Schwarzenegger was making his underground debut on pirated videos. Literally all of the students had seen "The Titanic," caught up in the same hype as viewers everywhere.

Despite the popularity of Schwarzenegger, Jean Claude Van Damme and other action heroes, the students expressed a strong preference for Russian movies. The most popular of the recent crop is director Alexei Balabanov's "Brat" (Brother), the story of a veteran of Russia's ill-conceived war with the breakaway republic of Chechnya. Disillusioned by the postcommunist government, the anti-hero, played by new idol Sergei Bodrov, is a violent social avenger as morally recognizable as any of Clint Eastwood's characters. In the Russian setting, strains of anti-Semitism and a palpable nostalgia for the former social prestige of the working class can be felt.

Other contemporary films enjoying popularity because they deal with the failures of post-Soviet Russia include Denis Evstigneev's "Mama," derived from a real-life incident involving a woman and her five children who hijack an airplane to free another son from a psychiatric hospital. Hijackers and frustrated war veterans also appear in Sergei Ursuliak's "Sochinenie ko Dniu Pobedy" (Victory Day Essay); the veterans in this film fought the Second World War, and the film therefore brought movie stars of the 1960s, Viacheslav Tikhonov, Mikhail Ulianov, Oleg Efremov and Nonna Mordiukova, into the new line cinema.

The so-called "new Russians," those profiteering handsomely from the new economic opportunities, find themselves victims of their own greed in the new movies. The wealthy protagonist of Ivan Dykhovichnii's "Muzyka dlia Dekabria" (Music for December) stabs himself to death in a paroxysm of alcoholism, his dissatisfaction with even his own life symbolized to viewers through his slovenly appearance. Girls who want money find themselves turning to prostitution in Valery Todorovsky's "Strana Glukhikh" (Land of the Deaf). "Moskva" (Moscow) relocates Anton Chekhov's "Three Sisters" to the national capital: this time the three women, a mother and her two daughters, make it out of the provinces and open up a nightclub, but they cannot find happiness any more easily than could Chekhov's original trio.

The relatively new release "Vor" (The Thief), directed by Pavel Chukhrai and produced at Russia's first completely private studio, presents the best case for the positive future of the film industry because it accomplished the impossible. It satisfied both the critics and the mass audience.
(unsuccessfully) for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. "Vor" has also played successfully to an international audience.

Analyzed as a metaphor for the country’s love/hate relationship with Stalin, "Vor" is set in the 1950s, the story of a widow and her young son who become involved with a man whom they initially take to be a military officer but later discover is a professional thief. This does not change their relationship, however; on the contrary, the two become his accomplices. The widow dies, the boy is sent to an orphanage, but he continues to think of the "Vor" as his father. At the end of the film, the now-adult boy finds himself a soldier in the disastrous Chechnia campaign, a site that promises to increase in importance because of its symbolic capacity to represent the bankrupt policies of the Yeltsin regime.40

The increasingly sophisticated viewing habits, though, are not reflected at the box offices of local movie houses.41 Although a few of the old and uncomfortable theaters have been modernized, such as the “Crystal Palace” on Petersburg’s Nevskii Prospekt, the ticket prices preclude casual viewing. The real revolution in Russian entertainment appears in the widespread proliferation of video cassette players; even students from provincial villages had videos at home.42 The large supply of feature films is apparent at any metro station, where kiosks sell comparatively inexpensive pirated versions of the latest films. Some students reported seeing "The Titanic" on video, on an undeniably illegal copy. Television companies also show a variety of films, from those that failed with the American viewers to “The English Patient,” which has not yet aired on t.v. in the USA.

The uncontrollable spread of videos make possible a sharp contrast of Russia before and after 1991. The generation who came of age after Gorbachev remember the long lines for goods, they remember boring television, and they cannot conceive of a future without videos. At this juncture the discrepancy between the content of the films and the act of viewing them comes into focus. Despite the movies that portray the difficult conditions of everyday life, and that eschew a Hollywood promise in a better tomorrow, the fact of their ready availability serves as a cogent reminder of the degree to which basic expectations about access have risen. However much the political contours of the future Russia remain dimmed by economic uncertainty, it is difficult to imagine a successful reimposition of cultural controls.

**Generation NeXt**

Just as Stalin depended upon the exuberance of the younger generation to launch the cultural revolution that secured his regime, so too does the Russian future (or that of any nation, for that matter)
depend upon those who reached political maturity from the 1980s to either safeguard or subvert the reform movement. Not surprisingly, survey research has shown them to be more optimistic about the future than their parents.

First, of course, this generation must define the future in relationship to their own best interests, and all are keenly aware of the role that technology will play. Although at the moment the price of home computers limits their proliferation, nearly one third of the students interviewed had regular access to one. Most used them for games—another pirated pasttime—but some surfed the Net with relative frequency. Like videos, computers are understood to be enjoyed as a right rather than a privilege.

The primary cultural issue, though, questions the ability of Russians to disassociate themselves from the state and develop the personal initiative that connects fundamental individualism with liberal capitalism and representative democracy. Certainly the “new Russians” have made individualism synonymous with the kind of greed that the intelligentsia asserted in the last century was anti-Russian. Only a few of the students held part-time jobs even in the summer; most relied upon the state to fund their education completely. Some even wanted the government to continue to pay for their summer vacations, as in the old days when they attended Pioneer camps. A few student entrepreneurs, though, have found summer tickets abroad working in tourist-oriented service jobs.

On the other hand, the freedom of movement, combined with the freedom of choice, are subtle values that pervade the consciousness of the new generation. Across the board the most popular leisure-time activity was going out to “clubs,” “nightclubs,” or “discotheques,” all variations of casual social gatherings where students drink socially (there is no regularly observed age limit for alcohol), dance, and mingle. Unlike the more controlled Komsomol gatherings in the past, the present-day clubs are far more spontaneous, springing up and collapsing from financial problems all around the city. Some of the names recall Western fashion, as in “Cleo” (sic) and “Triumph,” but others reflect a Russian sense of humor, such as “Moloko” (Milk). These clubs function as what Michel Foucault termed heterotopias, or places where “all the other real sites that can be found within a given culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” These clubs rules of conduct are informal, and dress and behavior emphasize greater self-fulfillment and self-expression; in other words, Russia’s “generation neXt” is moving toward a fundamental individualism that will shape other aspects of their lives.

It will be difficult, if not impossible, for this and the immediately subsequent generation to prize materialism as a worthwhile goal, although the current popularity of “Beverly Hills 90210” might soften the traditional prejudices. Like every cultural group, Russians must identify themselves through contrast with others. The moral certitude of the intelligentsia can give an almost religious imprimatur to the
Russian capacity for generosity.

The contemporaneous *intelligentsia*, though, have been called to answer for what many perceive as a complicity with the communist regime. The title of Masha Gessen’s study of the postcommunist *intelligentsia*, *Dead Again*, captures the paradox of her interviews with a traditional elite who have been abandoned by a society for whom they no longer serve a useful political function.47

The more surprising accusatory voice comes from famed dissident Andrei Siniavskii, whose *The Russian Intelligentsia* charges his former colleagues with a collusion with the Yeltsin government that borders on a criminal conspiracy.48 Siniavskii, who has lived in exile in Paris for nearly three decades, comes across as a nineteenth-century relic, incapable of distinguishing between Yeltsin and Stalin in his antipathy toward the state and his idealization of the social role of the *intelligent*.

Unquestionably the *intelligentsia* must come up with a new sense of itself just as every other social group is now trying to do. A university student, who would be considered an *intelligent* in the making, reported that the word now carries a sense of opprobrium; students today prefer to be called “educated” (*obrazovannye*) because that term conveys one aspect of their self-formation but without the cultural baggage that inspired the ironical title of Gessen’s book.49

Most recently Sergei Markov, a professor of political science at Moscow State University, pointed to the growing material wealth of the faculty, registered in the cars that now fill the parking lot, and the professors’ computers, in order to suggest that the *intelligentsia* is adapting more easily to the morally suspect side capitalism than many might like to admit.50 Unlike Siniavskii, however, Markov takes comfort in the university’s ability to maintain its prestigious position in the business atmosphere of present-day Moscow.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary commercial culture and its critics evidence a growing pluralism in Russian society, a separation into different interest groups that betray the feasibility of the unified national whole that the *intelligentsia* longed for, and that the Communist Party hoped to create through its ideology. This pluralism reveals a capacity for genuine democracy that grew its first roots in the final decades of the tsarist regime.51

A century after the Industrial Revolution, the subsequent Technological Revolution has generated many more options for communication. The commercial culture that has resulted from this does not preclude the resurgence of a Cold War in Russian-American relations any more than it guarantees a stable
capitalism in the near future. The skirmishing on the economic field has only just begun, as evidenced, for example, by homemade Russian confectionaries pushing aside the once-dominant Snickers candy bar.\textsuperscript{52} This growing cultural pluralism does, however, make it abundantly clear that the Party is over, and that even voters who support the legally-organized, communist-oriented political parties are participating in a national discourse that seeks to balance the potential for economic prosperity with freedom of the individual.
Endnotes


10. It is impossible, for example, to exaggerate the moral authority of Lev Tolstoi, whose death at a provincial railway station in 1910 created a media circus and his family estate at lasnaia poliana remains a shrine even today.


18. As Escobar explained, “Cultural differences embody—for better or for worse, this is relevant to the politics of research and intervention—possibilities for transforming the politics of representation, that is, for transforming social life itself.” In *Encountering Development*, 225. Although Escobar’s comments were not directed at Russia, the tsarist empire from the early 1860s found its history explained by modernization theory.

19. I interviewed three classes of students at the Oblastnoi Pedagogicheskii Institut and the Leningradskii Mashinostroiteln’yi Tekhnikum about their leisure-time activities. I also spoke more randomly with university students.


22. There is considerable information available on the oligarchs and the press. For a recent analysis see Andrei Piontkovskiy “SEASON OF DISCONTENT: News Media Belie Myths Of Oligarchs” *Moscow Times* (June 11, 1998). For the latest entry of oligarchs Piotr Aven and Mikhail Fridman into the television world with their proposed ATV, see the *Moscow Times* (June 26, 1998). (http://www.moscowtimes.ru)

23. This research is based on reading numerous issues of the magazines over the past year.

24. These conclusions are derived from interviews with intellectuals in the fall of 1992, when the serial had the popular imagination firmly in its grasp.


32. This is based on personal experience living in the USSR in 1986-87, when the mystery program created for British television aired on Soviet television.

33. Alekseeva was extremely popular among the students I interviewed.


39. Pavel is the son of Grigorii Chukhrai, the director of the Soviet classic “Ballad soldata” (Ballad of a Soldier), one of the first films from the 1960s to introduce any ambiguity about the experiences of Soviet soldiers during World War II.

40. Chukhrai borrowed from the bag of tricks of the prerevolutionary film directors, though, and changed the ending to a happy one for the American audience. but this failed to win him his Oscar.

41. For more on the financial aspect of Russian movie houses, see the article by Carol J. Williams in the Los Angeles Times (February 15, 1998). On the larger political impact of the Chechen campaign, see Anatol Lieven, Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

42. Mickiewicz, Split Signals, 11, discusses the inability of perestroika production to keep the supply paced with the demand for videos. This demand has literally exploded since 1991.

43. Wyman, Public Opinion, 23.

44. One of the students I interviewed had traveled to France last summer because of his knowledge of both the language and computers. See also “Student: kak letom porabotat’ za granitsel’ . . .,” Ekspress gazeta no. 21 (178) (June 1998): 7.

45. A survey taken from a representative sample of Russians showed this to be one of the least popular forms of leisure-time activity. However, it is extremely significant for this particular target group. Wyman, Public Opinion, 49.


51. I am currently writing a book on the development of commercial culture at the end of Russia’s old regime.
